The Army and Congress

Thoughts From the Chief

General Dennis J. Reimer, US Army Chief of Staff

IN THE SUMMER OF 1940, Army Chief of Staff (CSA) General George C. Marshall faced one of the biggest challenges of his long career. Over the preceding two years, Adolf Hitler had annexed Austria and the Sudetenland. His armies had invaded Poland and crushed resistance there. Earlier in the spring, the *Wehrmacht* had occupied France and England was next.

At home in America, Marshall faced a formidable task. He needed to begin the long task of building an army to fight the war that would surely come. The US Army was pitifully small and would need a huge infusion of manpower. That meant a draft. Yet the American people, well remembering the ravages of World War I and still in the throes of the Great Depression, were overwhelmingly isolationist and in no mood to enter another European war. Congress, which would have to pass any conscription legislation, reflected those sentiments. While President Franklin Delano Roosevelt knew that the country could not long avoid becoming entangled in the war, he was also running for re-election and could not get too far in front of public opinion, lest he lose the election and any chance for military preparedness along with it. As he struggled to find a balance between military necessities and political realities, the president began to rely more and more on CSA Marshall.

Fortunately, Marshall had begun his tenure as chief of staff with impeccable credentials. He had seen combat in the Philippines as a junior officer. He had been a brilliant staff officer under General John J. Pershing during World War I, when he was primary author of the First Army's complex move from St. Mihiel to the Meuse-Argonne, a march he then supervised to flawless execution in time for the war's final offensive. Between the wars, he had developed a reputation within the Army as a soldier's soldier, including his service as assistant commandant of the Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia, where he placed his mark on future World War II commanders. When Roosevelt selected him over many more senior officers to become CSA, he chose wisely and well.

Article 1, Section 8 of the United States* Constitution *gives Congress the power "to provide for the common defense . . . to raise and support Armies . . . to provide and maintain a Navy . . . to make rules for the Government and Regulation of the land and naval forces . . . to declare war . . . and to make laws which shall be necessary and proper for carrying out the foregoing powers." Congress's role is central. Its constitutional responsibilities for national security encompass every aspect of the military's functions except direct executive authority. Our professional military education must emphasize these points and foster in rising leaders a respect for the role that Congress plays in the military affairs of this representative democracy.

Yet Marshall's initial dealings with Congress yielded scant success. Isolationist legislators still wanted to cut military forces. Marshall knew better than to push reluctant members too hard. Still, he presented his case for preparedness, arguing that beginning a slow, steady buildup soon was far preferable to a massive mobilization later. As he did so, he developed a reputation as a professional soldier who did his homework. He quietly got to know the members of Congress, developing relationships based upon trust and mutual respect. Congressmen and senators learned that Marshall "told it like it was." Soon enough, he was known throughout the capital for competence and integrity.

During the Cold War, and especially Vietnam, Congress [became] more and more involved in the details of almost every aspect of the military. Concurrently, its need for information about the Army has increased many times over. As a result, providing that information has become a duty for far more of us—the Army needs your help in letting Congress know what we need to continue to be the best army in the world.

When two members of Congress introduced a selective service bill in the summer of 1940, Marshall seized the moment. He judged correctly that Nazi expansion in Europe was changing American minds. Leading private citizens began urging Congress to prepare the country for war and pass a conscription bill. Marshall began a campaign to inform the Congress about the dangers facing the nation, the risk that neglected readiness presented and the need to adopt a clear solution—an immediate decision to begin manning and equipping the Army.

Because he had taken the time to develop relationships with the US Congress and because his political instincts correctly told him that the timing was right, Marshall achieved his objective. Congress adopted the *Selective Service Act*, thereby paving the way for an Army buildup for World War II. Over five years, the Army grew to some 8 million men and women and played a pivotal role in defeating Axis aggression around the globe. Without Marshall's work—and Congress's action—the Army would have had a far slower start, a more painful introduction to battle, and a much longer road to victory, if victory came at all.

What lessons can we in the profession of arms learn from Marshall? The first is that personal credibility is the coin of the realm with Congress, just as it is in the Army. Marshall came to Washington with impeccable warrior credentials. He was every inch a soldier. He looked and acted the part. He had served with distinction in World War I and throughout the Army's lean interwar years.

Yet he added to this soldierly demeanor a commitment to the values that we embrace in the Army today. He treated members of Congress and their staffs with respect. Many soldiers had a tendency to disdain politicians—not Marshall. He accorded them professional courtesy and personal dignity and received the same in return. Moreover, Marshall had respect for Congress as an institution. He understood that Congress had a legitimate role to play in national security. He knew that Congress took its constitutional prerogatives seriously and that he had a responsibility to help them discharge those functions.

Even more important in his dealings with Congress was Marshall's personal integrity. Quiet and reserved, Marshall was not the kind who worked the crowd easily. Yet his reputation for straight-shooting honesty stood him in good stead with Congress members. They knew they could rely on what he told them, even if they might not always like it. When he told them the nation was in peril, members of Congress shouldered the burden and voted for a draft.

Congress was then and is now willing to help strengthen our nation's defenses, but they need accurate information to do so. But 1940 was a different time in our history; Congress's oversight of the military was far less extensive than it became in World War II. During the Cold War, and especially Vietnam, Congress continued to become more and more involved in the details of almost every aspect of the military. Concurrently, its need for information about the Army has increased many times over. As a result, providing that information has become a duty for far more of us—the Army needs your help in letting Congress know what we need to continue to be the best army in the world.

As we go forward, our institutions of professional military education must pursue vigorous and open-minded discussions of the Army's relations with Congress. It is important for all Army leaders to understand and appreciate Congress's role in national defense and their own roles in communicating with Congress. The president, secretary of defense and secretary of the Army, along with other civilian leaders of the armed services, maintain direct civilian control of the military. But the Congress plays an equally important role.

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General George C. Marshall testifying during a closed-door session with Edward T. Taylor, chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, 27 November 1939. Prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor, Army personnel working in the War Department or visiting Capitol Hill wore civilian clothes while on duty.

George C. Marshall Foundation

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A vibrant profession of arms is essential to the national defense. As military professionals, the responsibility for effective congressional relations belongs to all of us. That does not mean "lobbying." It does mean communication with and education of members of Congress on what we need to be an effective land force. We all know that it is a soldier's duty to communicate with the boss. As Marshall showed us, Congress is one of our bosses in a very real and constitutional sense.

How can we communicate effectively? In general, the answer is for all of us to know the Army story and to be able to articulate it well. Specifically, the techniques differ slightly at every level of command. At the unit level, communication with Congress is both simplest and most effective. Company commanders and first sergeants can let members of Congress and their staffs observe training events and talk freely with soldiers. When members visit our troops in the field, they never fail to be impressed by the training and commitment of our men and women in uniform. So a congressional visit represents a real opportunity for a unit and for the Army. The astute commander will explain to his or her soldiers that the visit is a chance to show the American people, through their elected representatives, that we are prudent stewards of the billions of dollars they authorize and appropriate

annually for the national defense. Show them that we are investing their constituents' money wisely to train and equip the finest land force in the world. Do not worry, our soldiers will tell the story well.

Senior leaders have a crucial role to play as well. Just as in any other operation, they set the standards for performance, communicating the commander's intent. This means letting subordinates know that congressional relations and telling the Army story are important. Giving accurate information to members of Congress is not just the right thing to do; it is the smart thing to do. They want to help and part of their job is "to provide for the common defense." Showing them our equipment, training, facilities, homes and soldiers allows them to know how well they are fulfilling their constitutional responsibilities.

Senior leaders also develop the conditions for success. In this regard, they can contribute best by keeping themselves and their subordinate officers informed. Before a congressional visit, the battalion's officer professional development program might devote time to the role of Congress in national defense to help explain the context of the visit. The battalion commander can also encourage junior officers to maintain a daily diet of current events to stay abreast of national security issues.

The responsibilities for congressional relations become more specific at higher levels. Garrison and installation commanders, for example, can and do play critical roles in fostering good community relations. Adopt-a-school and adopt-a-town programs are flourishing throughout the Army. Adopting the local congressional delegation is a logical next step. Inviting a congressman and his staff to visit and to become involved in the community life of one of the most important towns and employers in his district just makes sense.

General officers know that communicating effectively with Congress is one of the myriad responsibilities of flag rank. Most generals routinely interact with members of Congress as part of the duties of their positions. Chief of Legislative Liaison Major General Bruce Scott has recently developed a system for coordinating communications between Congress and Army general officers—Active, Guard and Reserve. This plan will allow us to anticipate and respond to congressional concerns and interests and provide better opportunities to educate members of Congress on Army issues. The intent is to foster mutual trust and respect as the Army communicates its message to Congress. How will we do this? Our hope is that general officers can get to know their local members and their staffs, that they will exchange visits and include one another in community events.

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If all of us, at every level, do our parts, building mutual trust, telling the Army story and educating members and staff on Army priorities, we will find that Congress can and will make informed decisions about our national defense. And in the final analysis, general officers will not be the most important communicators with Congress—our soldiers will. Our young officers, noncommissioned officers and enlisted men and women tell the Army story best because they *are* the Army story. Just as General Marshall—because of his warrior credentials, integrity and sense of duty—was his own best salesman when talking to Congress, our soldiers are the best affirmation we have for the great things the Army does every day, because soldiers are our credentials. ***MR***

General Dennis J. Reimer is the US Army chief of staff. He received a B.S. from the US Military Academy and an M.S. from Shippensburg State College. He has served in a variety of command and staff positions in joint and allied assignments in the Continental United States, Europe, Korea and Vietnam, including commander, US Army Forces Command, Fort McPherson, Georgia; US Army vice chief of staff, Washington, D.C.; deputy chief of staff, Operations and Plans, US Army, Military Staff Committee, United Nations, Washington, D.C.; commander, 4th Infantry Division (Mechanized), Fort Carson, Colorado; assistant chief of staff, C3/J3, US Combined Forces Command, and chief of staff, US Army Element, Combined Field Army, Korea; commander, III Corps Artillery, and deputy assistant commandant, US Army Field Artillery School, Fort Sill, Oklahoma; and chief of staff, 8th Infantry Division (Mechanized), Bad Kreuznach, Germany. He has over 37 years of commissioned service and will retire this summer after four years as the chief of staff. His article "Developing Great Leaders in Turbulent Times" appeared in the January-February 1998 edition of Military Review.